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ABSTRACT

The linguistic situation in Ireland over the last few centuries is examined from the rise of Irish dialects of English to the present. Four aspects of this history are examined: factors affecting the emergence of Hiberno-English dialects beginning in the seventeenth century, including opportunity for learning English, patterns in literacy and bilingualism, and the evolution of patterns of English usage in Ireland; general characteristics of Hiberno-English and the relative influences of the two origin languages (Irish and English) on phonology, syntax, and lexicon; Hiberno-English in comparison with creoles and other contact vernaculars; and the relevance of one language contact model to Hiberno-English. It is concluded that language contact and shift in Ireland have both universal and unique aspects, generally following the pattern predicted by the Thomason & Kaufman (1988) model but characterized by the amount of superstratal input to Hiberno-English and by persistence of certain features that have disappeared from other dialects. Language maps of Ireland in 1800 and 1851 are appended. Contains 27 references. (MSE)

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The Story of Language Contact and Shift in Ireland: How Unique, How Universal?

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1. Introduction

There has been a noticeable revival of interest in language-contact studies in recent years. One of the reasons for this has been the accumulation and increasing availability of evidence from numerous 'contact vernaculars' (such as creoles, for example) which has shown that there are a lot of shared features between contact situations and their linguistic outcomes even in widely differing geographical and linguistic settings. Another factor has been no doubt the practical importance of language-contact studies for other fields of inquiry such as language learning and acquisition, language education and language planning, especially in ethnically and socially mixed communities. At the same time, and probably as a result of the fresh interest in these questions, we have witnessed the emergence of new theories and models of language contact which have raised its theoretical attractiveness.

This paper seeks to capture some of the essential characteristics of the linguistic situation in Ireland over the last few centuries, starting from the rise of the Irish dialects of English with their special features, and extending to the present day. Language-contact and language-shift in Ireland will be viewed against the background of general models of language contact and language acquisition in conditions of language contact and shift, and an attempt made to differentiate 'universal'[1]

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features from those which are specific or peculiar to the Irish contact situation.

2. THE EMERGENCE OF HIBERNO-ENGLISH DIALECTS

The circumstances in which large numbers of Irish-speakers set out to learn English from the seventeenth century onwards can in general terms be described or characterised as *second-language acquisition in an overwhelmingly 'naturalistic' setting* (Guilfoyle 1986:127; Odlin 1994:142 f.). Bliss (1977:16-17) provides the following description of the type of situation in which Irish-speakers were at this period:

> One fact is of vital importance for the history of Anglo-Irish dialects: the Irishman learning English had no opportunity of learning it from speakers of standard English.[...].
>
> Irishmen learning English, therefore, had to rely on teachers of their own race, whose own English was very different from standard English, so that there was nothing to check the progressive influence of the Irish language. In each generation the speech of the teachers was already strongly influenced by Irish, the speech of the learners even more so.

The general lack of schooling is also indirectly confirmed by statistics on the development of *bilingualism and literacy* in Ireland. On the basis of the 1851 census and its estimates for numbers of bilingual and literate persons, Odlin (1994) has calculated the numbers of *illiterate bilinguals* in the baronies of County Galway in the west of Ireland. According to his results, illiterate bilinguals clearly outnumbered literate bilinguals at that date: the average percentage of illiterate bilinguals in Co. Galway turns out to be as high as 61.16% (note that in three baronies there were too few Irish-speakers to allow estimation of the number of illiterate bilinguals; for further details, see Odlin 1994). This, Odlin argues, provides strong evidence against the view held by some scholars that schools were somehow instrumental in the transmission of English among the Irish-speaking population; Odlin's conclusion is that the acquisition of English was primarily naturalistic and took place with little or no help from schools (1994:144).

In the seventeenth century, the formation period of most dialects of Hiberno-English, most of the population was still Irish-speaking and monolingual. According to authorities on this subject, the situation remained relatively stable even throughout the eighteenth century: thus, de Fréine (1977:73) states that the relationships between the two competing languages at the end of the eighteenth century were geographically very similar to what they had been in the year 1700. Two of the provinces, Connaught and Munster, were still almost entirely Irish-speaking. English had made most inroads into the eastern and north-eastern parts, especially into the counties of Dublin, Wicklow, Kildare, Carlow and South Wexford, and into the province of Ulster. Not surprisingly, English had become dominant in the big towns. There are no official censuses from this period, but Hindley (1990) has reconstructed the language situation at about 1800 on the basis of various literary sources and the later censuses conducted in 1851, 1881, and 1911. His results are shown on Map 1 in the Appendix.

After the turn of the century, the rate and extent of language shift increased dramatically. The first official census, that of 1851, reveals that a massive change in the linguistic situation had already taken place: for instance, while in 1800 some two million out of the total population of five million in Ireland were still monoglot speakers of Irish, the figure for 1851 had dropped to just over 300,000, i.e. down to some 5 per cent from the 40 per cent in 1800 (for details, see de Fréine 1977:80 f.; Hindley 1990:13 ff.)[2]. These figures indicate, of course, that *bilingualism* had become very wide-spread, and also, that the process of language shift had begun on a large scale.

The language map for the year 1851 (from Ó Cuív 1969), given in the Appendix (Map 2), looks very different from that of 1800: Irish has already receded from central Ireland to the west and south-west, the strongest bastions being in Counties Galway, Mayo, Clare, and Kerry. Since 1851, the 'flight from Irish' continued at about the same pace, and by the next census of 1891, the number of monoglot speakers of Irish had declined from over 300,000 to about only 38,000 (see, e.g. Gregor 1980:274), and the total of those who had been returned as Irish-speakers (whether monoglot or bilingual) also had dropped to a little over half a million (Ó Cuív 1969:129). The present-day situation is well-known:

there are no monoglot speakers, and the number of those who use Irish as their habitual medium of communication is now estimated in terms of thousands rather than of tens of thousands (see, e.g. Hindley 1990:251).

3. General characteristics of Hiberno-English

As already mentioned, the lack of formal instruction and the lack of competent teachers are among the major factors which influenced the nature of the emerging contact variety, Irish English or Hiberno-English (HE), the cover term often used for the Irish dialects of English. Bliss (1984:150) provides the following general linguistic characterisation of the southern dialects of HE:

> In the pronunciation and vocabulary of southern Hiberno-English it is possible to trace the influence both of older strata of the English language and of the Irish language; in grammar, syntax and idiom the peculiarities of southern Hiberno-English depend exclusively on the Irish language. Even in the parts of Ireland where Irish has long been extinct its unconscious influence still controls the usage of speakers of English.

Bliss's description points out the two main sources of HE phonology, grammar and lexicon, viz. earlier English and the Irish language, with special emphasis on the latter as regards the distinctive features of HE syntax and 'idiom'. An essentially similar view is held by many other writers on the subject, e.g. by Henry (1977), although he reserves the term 'Hiberno-English' for that variety of English which was brought to Ireland by English settlers in the seventeenth century. Henry's term for the characteristically rural varieties of Irish English is Anglo-Irish, by which he means "language forming on the same base as corresponding Irish structures, with native intonation and pronunciation and a foraging for English materials" (1977: 20).

The linguistic characteristics of HE and their origins have been a matter of some controversy in the most recent research, and many scholars have questioned Bliss's and Henry's 'traditional' view on the primacy of the Irish substratal input to HE. For example, some of the well-known peculiarities of the HE tense and aspect system were earlier explained as

Irishisms but are now considered by many to have equally plausible sources in Early Modern English (for a discussion of the HE perfect forms, see, e.g. Harris 1984; of the cooccurrence of *do* and *be*, e.g. Kallen 1986). There are even those who estimate the overall impact of Irish on HE to be very minimal. Thus, Lass (1990: 148), who discusses selective phonological features of HE, arrives at the following conclusion:

> ...we can define it [southern Hiberno-English], not as a 'contact-English' in any important sense (regardless of the fact that it began as a second-language variety), but as a perfectly normal first-language, internally evolved variety, with only marginal contact effects. And, as it happens, a phonologically very conservative one, whose particular archaisms form a clearly recognisable subset of the most salient features of seventeenth-century southern Mainland English.

It may turn out to be impossible to find consensus on the exact degree of influence from the substrate, on the one hand, and the superstrate, on the other. However, there is a lot of evidence which confirms the significant contribution of Irish to HE phonology, syntax, and lexicon. For instance, my own studies in HE syntax have indicated that Irish-derived features are most frequent in those areas of Ireland where Irish still retains some positions, or is still remembered within 'living memory'. To mention but one example, the preposition *with* is used in the west of Ireland in contexts such as (1) and (2), where only a temporal reading is possible: [3]

(1) He was the chief of the police...he's dead *with* long, he was nearly ninety years when he died. (Kerry: D.B.)

(2) I wasn't at a dance *with* a long time. (Clare: C.O'B.)

The temporal meaning of *with* in HE constitutes a clear *calque* on the corresponding Irish construction involving the preposition *le*. Why it has been transferred to HE is explained by the fact that *le* in Irish has two meanings: temporal 'for the duration of' and instrumental 'with'. Both meanings, evidently, are reproduced by *with* in HE.

A similar 'dialect continuum' with respect to Irish influence can be documented for some other features of HE syntax, too. These include, e.g., the so-called cleft sentences and the use of the conjunction *and* as a subordinator, which are exemplified by (3) and (4) below (for further discussion, see Filppula 1991; Odlin 1992):

(3) Ah, very little's [very few farmers] give up farming round this area. *It's looking for more land a lot of them are*. (Wicklow: J.N.)

(4) He said you could hear them [strange noises] yet, inside in his own house late at night *and he in bed*. (Clare: M.R.)

Besides the observed regional stratification, the role of the Irish substrate is also confirmed by independent evidence from other contact situations between English and the Celtic languages. For example, several studies have demonstrated that the variety of English spoken in the Hebrides exhibits syntactic features which are strikingly similar to those met in HE. Sabban (1982) notes parallels between the tense and aspect systems of Hebridean English and Hiberno-English; Shuken (1984:155) points out the possibility of Gaelic influence on the use of clefting and of the definite article in contexts where other dialects would not have it; and Odlin (1992:190) cites examples of subordinating *and* recorded from a bilingual speaker, who was born and reared on one of the islands of the Inner Hebrides. Yet the external circumstances and the dates at which English was brought to the Hebrides were very different from those in Ireland: in the Inner Hebrides English did not become the dominant language until the nineteenth century, and in the Outer Hebrides Scottish Gaelic still survives alongside English in many communities (Shuken 1984; Odlin 1992). Furthermore, in the Hebridean setting schools played a more important role in spreading English than they did in Ireland. However, English did not achieve a firm position as a medium of education until the mid-nineteenth century, and when it eventually happened, the teachers were likely to have been speakers of educated Scottish Standard English, or Highlanders and Islanders who had been educated in the Lowlands by various religious societies (Clement 1980: 14; Shuken 1984: 153). This

means that the Gaelic speakers in the Hebrides were exposed to forms of English which must have been considerably different from those in the Irish context, and more particularly, that the role of diffusion from earlier, and especially southern, varieties of English must have been significantly smaller than in Ireland. For these reasons, and taking also into account the close similarity between the substrate languages, Hebridean English is a useful point of comparison for HE, providing important indirect evidence of the substratal influence of Irish on at least some of the typical HE constructions.

Other types of linguistic evidence are also available to support the substratum view. We need one mention that HE uses syntactic constructions which are not attested in other dialects of English. A well-known example is the so-called *after* perfect, as in (5). This is evidently a calque on the corresponding Irish pattern.

(5) *They're after building* a big block of offices here in Tralee. (Kerry: G.W.)

In conclusion, the Irish input to HE vernacular is far from negligible even in syntax, which is generally held to be more resistant to contact influences than phonology or lexicon, and although several controversial issues await further study, it seems justified to consider HE a kind of contact vernacular. The next question is: to what extent is HE comparable to other contact vernaculars, including creoles?

4. HIBERNO-ENGLISH VS. CREOLES AND OTHER CONTACT VERNACULARS

On the basis of the social circumstances surrounding the language contact and shift in Ireland during the 17th century and onwards, the genesis of the Irish dialects of English resembles that of creoles. Some writers have, indeed, noted certain linguistic similarities between these varieties. For example, Todd (1984: 26) writes on the process of language shift in the northern parts of Ireland as follows:

> One can, for example, make a good case in support of the thesis that Gaelic was not so much replaced by English in rural areas in

> Northern Ireland, as that Gaelic was probably relexified towards English while the phonology, idioms and sentence patterns of the native people remained Gaelic.

Relexification is one of the processes through which creoles have been said to evolve. What gives Todd's thesis (or hypothesis, rather) initial plausibility is the fact that both creoles and HE dialects have arisen under conditions of fairly rapid language shift. Furthermore, both can be described as contact vernaculars, because they reflect varying degrees of 'imperfect' learning and simplification processes due to the prevailing mode of transmission of the target language.

There are, however, some important differences. First, what is peculiar to the Irish situation is the existence there of a *single substrate*, Irish Gaelic (with its many different dialects, though). By comparison, most, if not all, creoles have evolved in more complex, linguistically *heterogeneous* circumstances (see, e.g. Thomason, *in press*). In Ireland, the confined nature and geographical isolation of the linguistic area have obviously helped to simplify the setting so as to make it in essence what Thomason (*in press*) has termed a 'two-language contact situation', as opposed to creolisation, which typically involves several languages. Not surprisingly, the linguistic outcomes of the two types of situation differ in many respects (see the discussion further below).

Secondly, there is a difference in the degree of *bilingualism* of the populations concerned. As Thomason (*in press*) notes, pidgins and creoles hardly ever arise in extensively bilingual, or even multilingual, communities. The Irish situation must have varied a lot from time to time and from place to place, but by the time the process of language shift got well under way, i.e. from around 1800 onwards, bilingualism may be assumed to have been quite wide-spread. De Fréine (1977:80) estimates the number of bilinguals in 1800 at one and a half million out of a total population of five million, i.e. about 30 per cent. According to Hindley (1990:17), it had risen to some 95 per cent by 1851.

A third difference between creoles and HE relates to the amount of input from the *superstrate language(s)*, which, I believe, follows directly from

the differences in the sociohistorical circumstances of the contact situation. HE has been found to preserve a lot of phonological, syntactic and other features which were characteristic of the English of the Early Modern English period and some of which have now been lost in other English dialects. The superstratal input to creoles is, not so much phonological or syntactic but *lexical* in nature: creole vocabulary is usually based on that of the European superstrate language, but grammar is a mixture of elements drawn from the substrate languages.

Despite the disagreements over the superstratal vs. substratal inputs to HE, we can point out several clear examples of EModE (and even earlier) phonological and grammatical features that are still retained in modern HE dialects. According to Lass (1990), conservative phonological features include 'incomplete split' of ME /u/, as in *put* vs. *but*; incomplete 'NURSE Merger' in words containing ME /ir, er, ur/ (*bird, fern, urn*); and monophthongal realisations of ME /a:/ and /O:/, as in *face, goat* (for further discussion, see Lass 1990; see also Henry 1958: 110 ff.; Harris 1990). In morphology, some speakers of HE vernacular still preserve, e.g. old plural forms such as *shoon* for *shoes* and *childer* for *children*; these have been long lost in other dialects of English. Conservative syntactic features also occur in HE; one example is the use of the pattern *for to* + infinitive, as in (6):

(6) ...the people aren't there now *for to* do it. (Kerry: D.B.)

This construction, which goes back to Middle English and even Old English, is also retained in other dialectal and nonstandard varieties of English.

Fourthly, if HE were to be likened to creoles, one should expect to find some evidence of HE pidgin, with the normal array of features associated with pidgins. A creole is commonly defined as a more advanced stage of a pidgin which has become the mother tongue of a group of people (see, e.g. Todd 1984: 4). Some of the most typical linguistic features of English-based pidgins include, e.g. use of mother tongue phonology, serial verbs, negation with *no* only, lack of verb inflections for tense, person or number, lack of copula, use of reduplicated forms, fixed word order, etc.

(see, e.g. Todd 1984: 4 ff.). Of course, we have very little evidence from the type of English that the Irish learners spoke in the early days of the language contact, but the scraps of evidence which we have from written sources (see, e.g. Bliss 1979) do not, generally, support the existence of HE pidgin. It is true that a certain amount of simplification occurred in early HE (e.g., subject dropping or lack of concord between subject and verb), but this falls far short of the full set of typical pidgin features.

The basic picture does not change if we compare the linguistic characteristics of early HE with those of creoles (see, e.g. Romaine 1988: 47 ff. for a list of the most typical features of creole grammars), although Todd (1984: 74) mentions Hiberno-English as a borderline case between English-related creoles and dialects of English. The basic differences, however, lie in what has already been mentioned above: creole grammars typically draw on more than one substrate language, whereas HE makes use of just one substrate source, Irish. It seems that, as suggested by Thomason (*in press*), there is a qualitative difference between contact languages which have evolved in conditions of two-language contact, involving relatively *persistent* ethnic communities, on the one hand, and those (like pidgins and creoles) which arise in linguistically heterogeneous settings involving *'new'* ethnic communities, on the other.

Finally, the *reasons* for language shift are yet another differentiating factor between creoles and HE. In pidgin and creole genesis, people have no choice, as it were, because a common medium of communication is an objective necessity dictated by their everyday needs, and the mixed nature of the linguistic and social environment excludes the possibility of promoting any one 'local' language to the status of a *lingua franca*. In the Irish context, by comparison, a bilingual society could (at least in theory) have been a workable alternative to a total language shift, and this was, of course, the situation well into the 19th century (and still is in some very restricted areas and contexts). The eventual course of development was not only due to external pressures on the indigenous language, but was determined to a great extent by various 'subjective' factors as well: as de Fréine puts it, most of the measures used to suppress Irish "were not the product of law or official regulation, but of a social self-generated movement of collective behaviour among the people themselves" (1977: 84).

5. HIBERNO-ENGLISH AND GENERAL MODELS OF LANGUAGE CONTACT

Other generalisations relevant to the Irish situation and the nature of HE emerge, e.g., from some of the general models of language contact discussed in the literature. Among these, the model of contact-induced change proposed by Thomason and Kaufman (1988) deserves a special place because of its comprehensiveness: instead of being a more or less random set of individual generalisations, their proposal seeks to incorporate into one and the same explanatory and predictive model both the sociohistorical and linguistic factors which are the most crucial in determining the outcome of language contact in different types of circumstances.

Thomason and Kaufman's starting-point is a distinction between two basic types of contact situation, viz. *language maintenance* and *language shift*. Under each type, the model then presents in broad terms the most likely linguistic outcomes of language contact. Principal factors determining these are the size of the population involved in language contact or shift, the intensity of contact (casual vs. intensive contact), the 'rate of success' and nature of the learning process (availability of the target language), and the degree of bilingualism among the borrowing-language or shifting speakers. Thomason and Kaufman's model is shown in a slightly simplified form in Table 1:

Table 1. Thomason and Kaufman's model of contact-induced change (based, with some omissions and simplifications, on Thomason and Kaufman 1988: 50).

CONTACT-INDUCED LANGUAGE CHANGE

in LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE	**in LANGUAGE SHIFT**
a) casual contact, including little bilingualism among borrowing-language speakers:	a) small shifting group or perfect learning:
Only (nonbasic) Vocabulary Borrowed	**No Interference in Target L as a Whole**
b) intensive contact, including much bilingualism among borrowing-language speakers over a long period of time:	b) large shifting group and imperfect learning:
Much lexical borrowing; moderate to heavy structural borrowing (especially in phonology and syntax)	**moderate to heavy substratum** (or superstratum/adstratum) **Interference** (especially in phonology and syntax)
c) overwhelming long-term cultural pressure from source-language speaker group:	c) extreme unavailability of target language:
massive grammatical replacement (or language death)	**only vocabulary successfully acquired, abrupt creolization**

According to this model, borrowing (the process at work in maintenance situations) and interference (in language shift) affect the various levels of language to differing degrees, depending on the basic type of situation. In the maintenance situations, borrowing starts from the lexicon, from where

it proceeds to syntax and other levels, if there is intensive contact and a lot of bilingualism over a long period of time. In language shift, where we are dealing with 'shift-induced interference' (i.e. substratum interference in the more common terminology), the overall picture is different: interference generally affects the phonetic/phonological and syntactic levels most of all. In extreme cases, the ultimate result is either 'massive grammatical replacement' (or even language death) or 'abrupt' creolization.[4]

We can now try to assess the case of HE from the perspective of Thomason and Kaufman's model. Broadly speaking, the sociohistorical setting of language contact and shift in Ireland and the linguistic characteristics of HE confirm the predictions laid down by Thomason and Kaufman's model. As Guilfoyle (1986: 127) notes, HE displays "preponderance of phonological and syntactic interference, over lexical interference", and this is what the model predicts, given that the case of HE is placed (as I think it should be) under the heading of 'language shift/large shifting group/imperfect learning'. Guilfoyle's characterisation is also in line with Bliss (1984: 141), who writes that "the number of actual Irish words used in Southern Hiberno-English is small, even in rural areas; educated people do not use them at all, except by conscious rusticism". These statements must not be understood as denying the importance of Irish input to HE vocabulary; one can detect a lot of Irish influence at that level, too, but the issue here is one of *relative* importance.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, every story of language contact and shift is unique in a certain obvious sense. Whoever or whatever those people and generations are who undergo the process of language shift at any given time, it remains a fact that "their likes will not be there again", to use a familiar Irish saying. Yet all stories share certain similarities, and as I have tried to show, there are factors which constitute obvious links between the case of HE and those of other contact vernaculars. These include, most notably, the general mode of transmission of a new language: instead of the 'normal' way of passing on the language from one generation to another, contact vernaculars are typically acquired under circumstances where transmission is disrupted some way or another, and where schooling plays

little or no role. However, in the Irish context the universal aspect is counterbalanced by the uniqueness of the linguistic setting, which manifests itself especially in the existence of a single, easily identifiable substrate. The fact that Irish (or any one of its dialects) can be shown to have been in the right place at the right time makes HE and the linguistic history of Ireland a particularly interesting object of study.

The linguistic outcomes of the language contact and shift in Ireland also contain both universal and unique elements. In general terms, the distinctive characteristics of HE follow the pattern predicted on the basis of Thomason & Kaufman's model of contact-induced change: contact influences are most salient at the phonological and syntactic levels, whereas HE lexicon is less obviously marked by substratal influence. A unique feature is the amount of superstratal input to HE, and the persistence in HE vernacular of certain features which have disappeared from other dialects. But the most distinctive element in the Irish story of language contact is undoubtedly the way in which it all led to large-scale language shift within such a remarkably short space of time.

NOTES

[1] The term 'universal' is here used in a very general sense as the opposite of 'language-specific', and it is not meant to be associated with any particular theoretical framework.

[2] I am aware that the official censuses have been criticised on several grounds, but that is a problem I cannot tackle in this paper.

[3] The examples here are taken from a corpus of present-day HE vernacular compiled and collected by myself in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The corpus consists of speech samples recorded from the following four regions: Counties Clare and Kerry in the (south-)west of Ireland, County Wicklow and Dublin City in the east of Ireland. For further details of the corpus, see Filppula 1986. The provenance of the examples and the speaker initials have been given in brackets after each example.

[4] I have left out pidgins altogether, and in Thomason and Kaufman's model, too, they are treated as a category of their own because they do not involve transmission of any kind, normal or disrupted.

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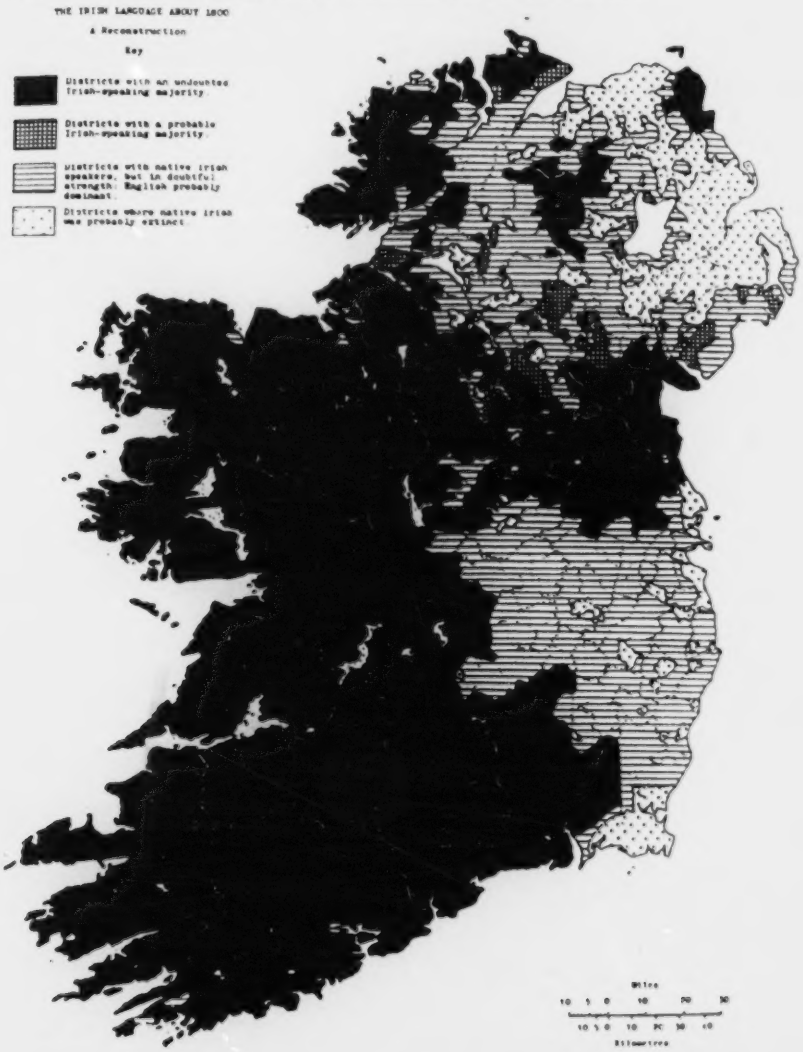
APPENDIX: **Language maps of Ireland in 1800 and 1851.**



Map 1. **The Irish language about 1800. A reconstruction based on literary sources and censuses 1851, 1881, 1911** (from *Hindley 1990: 9*).

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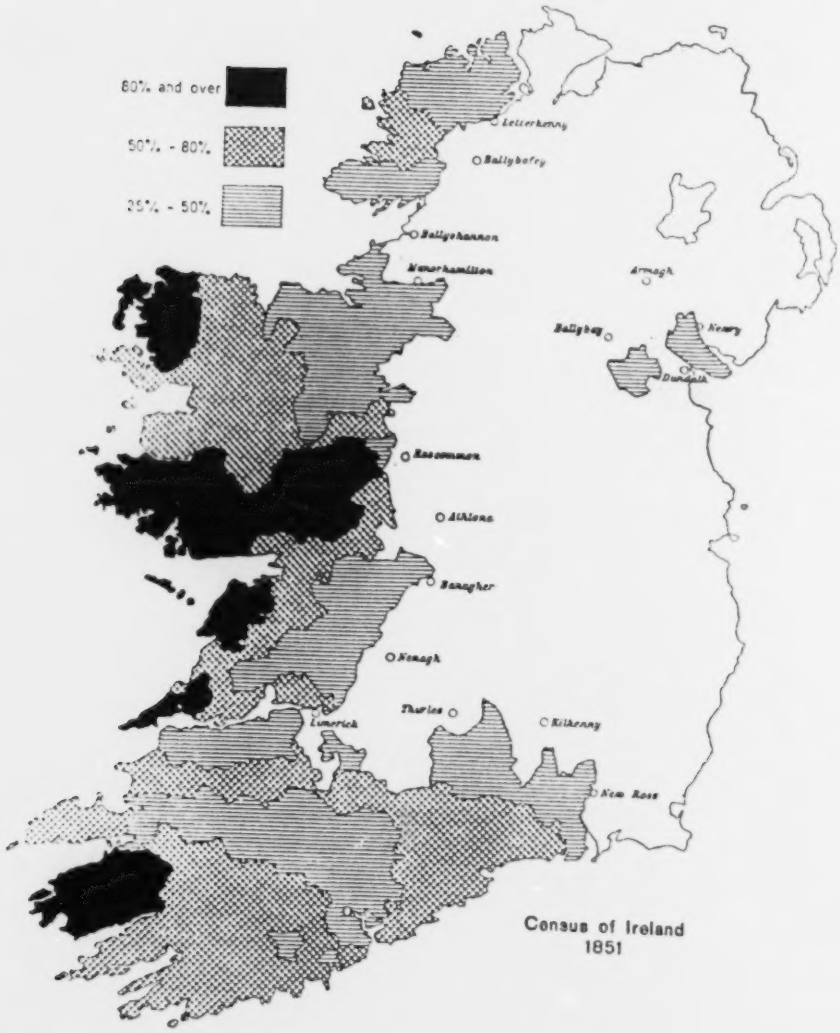

Map 2. **Census of Ireland 1851** (from *Ó Cuív 1969*).

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